Bristoe Campaign

October-November 1863

Burning of the Rappah...

Fauquier County in the Civil War

From 1861-1865, Fauquier County's "hallowed grounds" were the site of twelve battles and countless troop movements, raids, skirmishes, and encampments. With its proximity to Washington and Richmond, the county was key to Union and Confederate strategy.

Warrenton Courthouse,1862 Photo by Timothy O'Sullivan. New York Historical Society Collection.

In 1862 and 1863, General Robert E. Lee used Fauquier County to his advantage. The engagements at Rappahannock Station I and Thoroughfare Gap were indispensable to his victory at Second Manassas in August 1862, while the cavalry battles at Brandy Station, Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville shielded Lee's infantry as he commenced his second invasion of the North during the spring of 1863.

But after a fateful engagement in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Fauquier County's role in the war changed. No longer the cradle of Confederate invasion, the battle lands of Manassas Gap, Auburn, Buckland Mills, and Rappahannock Station II were Lee's path of retreat.

Yet much as Gettysburg did not end the war, Lee's retreat was not the last that Fauquier County saw of Civil War soldiers. For as long as the war continued, Fauquier County remained a well-traversed piece of America's hallowed grounds. ■

*Scouts, mapmakers, officers and cavalry units relied on their horses. Re-enactors at Kelly's Ford in 2006.*

Bristoe Campaign
October-November 1863

*General George G. Meade
National Archives image.*

After the Battle of Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863, Union General George G. Meade was criticized for not destroying Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his army of Northern Virginia; instead, Lee slipped away from Meade, crossing the Potomac River back into the Confederacy. That fall, Meade planned an offensive to attack Lee's position behind the Rapidan River in Orange County, Virginia.

Emboldened when Lee dispatched part of General James Longstreet's Corps to the western theatre of war, Meade defeated Lee's forces in Culpeper, Virginia, at the Battle of Culpeper Courthouse. Meade, however, soon found his role reversed when, on September 24, he too dispatched troops to the west. Lee, learning of Meade's weakened force, seized the initiative and attempted to turn Meade's right flank, forcing Meade to withdraw along the Orange and Alexandria Railroad.
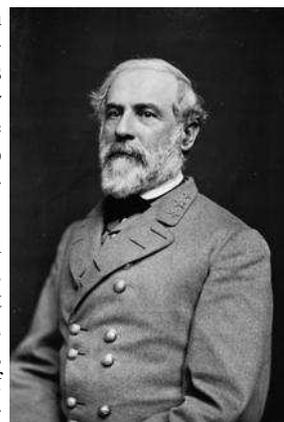
*General Robert E. Lee
Photo by Julian Vannerson.
Library of Congress Collection.*
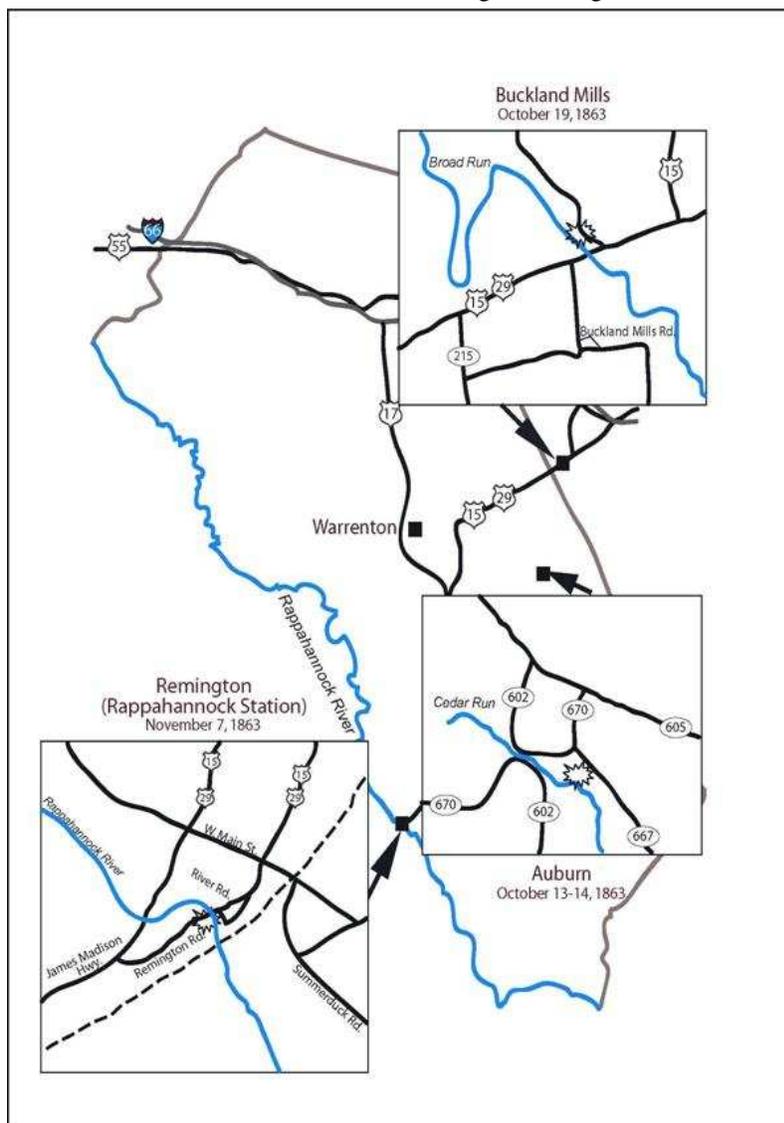
Although both Meade and Lee achieved victories in this campaign, the overall result was inconclusive. Lee was frustrated that his initiative had not met more success, even though his troops pushed back Meade forty miles and denied Federal troops valuable railroad access. In the end, the Bristoe campaign accomplished little, and both armies survived to fight another campaign. ∎

The Battles of Auburn

October 13-14, 1863

Result:
Inconclusive

Troops Engaged:
~20,000 US
~32,000 CS

Casualties:
~78 US
~85 CS

In the late afternoon on October 13, Confederate cavalry under General Lunsford Lomax encountered the Union Third Corps as it marched north along the Old Carolina Road to Greenwich. Lomax, guarding an important crossroads south of Auburn, skirmished with the Third Corps but withdrew to Warrenton upon discovering he confronted a much larger force.

Lomax's commander General J.E.B. Stuart and his men spent the day reconnoitering near Catlett Station. Upon their return, they found themselves cut off from their Confederate base and trapped between portions of the Union army. Stuart hid his men in a ravine for the night and sent scouts to Warrenton to procure reinforcements from General Richard Ewell. The Union Third Corps passed by unknowingly.

The next morning, Union Brigadier General John C. Caldwell's Second Corps Division advanced over the Cedar Run bridge and prepared for action on a hill to the north, where some broke for breakfast. Stuart moved part of his force to a hill located one-half mile east of these Federals. While they ate their repast on this hill, known afterwards as "Coffee Hill," Stuart unleashed artillery fire. After recovering from this unexpected assault, the Federals responded with their own artillery fire.

Meanwhile, Ewell's reinforcements drew near Auburn and skirmished with Federal troopers. Once the sound of fighting was heard, Stuart began a full attack. Stuart ordered General John B. Gordon to charge Union General John Caldwell's men east of Coffee Hill near St. Stephens Road. The Federals eventually beat back Gordon's charge, but not before Stuart and his men escaped. This inconclusive battle allowed but did not deter the Federals from their rendezvous at Bristoe Station. ∎
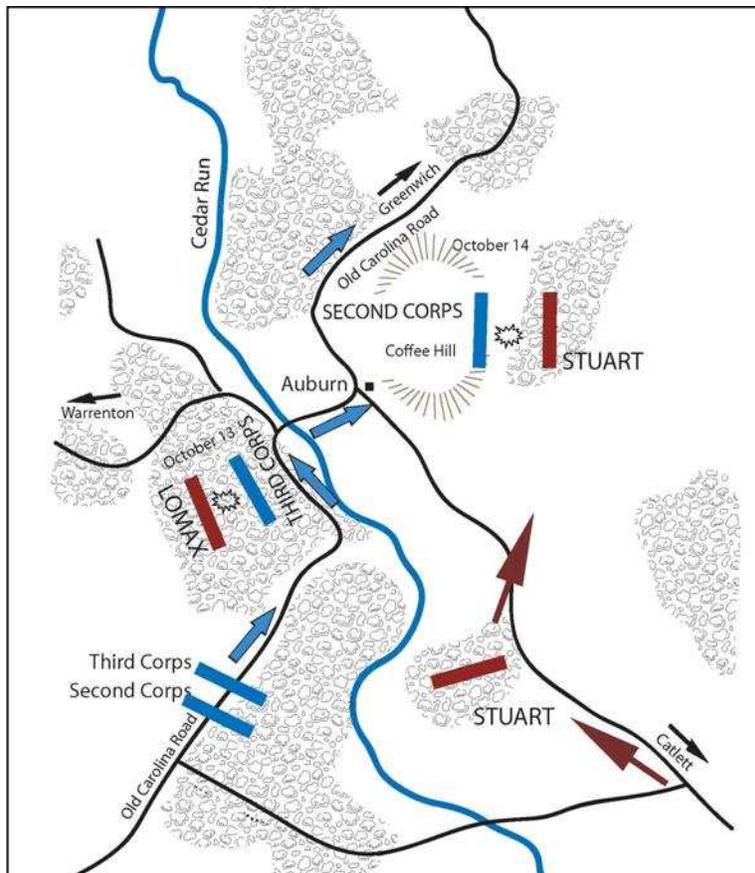
Battle of Buckland Mills
October 19, 1863

Result:
Confederate
Victory

Troops Engaged:
~4,000 US
~8,000 CS

Casualties:
~250 US
~30 CS

On the morning of October 19, General J.E.B. Stuart's divisions held the Town of Buckland using its buildings as cover against the Federals who occupied the heights east of Broad Run. Leaving George A. Custer's brigade to guard the town and Buckland bridge, Union Generals Davies and Kilpatrick followed Stuart west on the turnpike. When Kilpatrick's force attacked from the east, Stuart "retreated designedly toward Warrenton" luring the federals down the turnpike and into a trap. Confederate General Lee concealed 5,200 cavalrymen in the woods on the federal left. Lee sounded cannon signals as the rear of Davies' brigade passed them. Confederates then "came up perpendicular to the pike and cut their column in two," driving Custer (at the rear of the Federal column) back over the Buckland bridge.

Meanwhile, the front of General Davies' column had moved west past New Baltimore, where Stuart's brigades charged the front of the Federal column at the sound of General Lee's cannon fire, causing General Davies to reverse direction and take a position on a low range of hills between New Baltimore and Buckland to make a stand. Lee's men combined forces with Stuart's, attacking furiously the Federal front, flank and rear, driving the

Trapped in a dangerous position at Auburn on the night of October 13-14, 1863, General J.E.B. Stuart escaped and delivered a much needed Confederate victory at Buckland Mills on October 19, 1863.
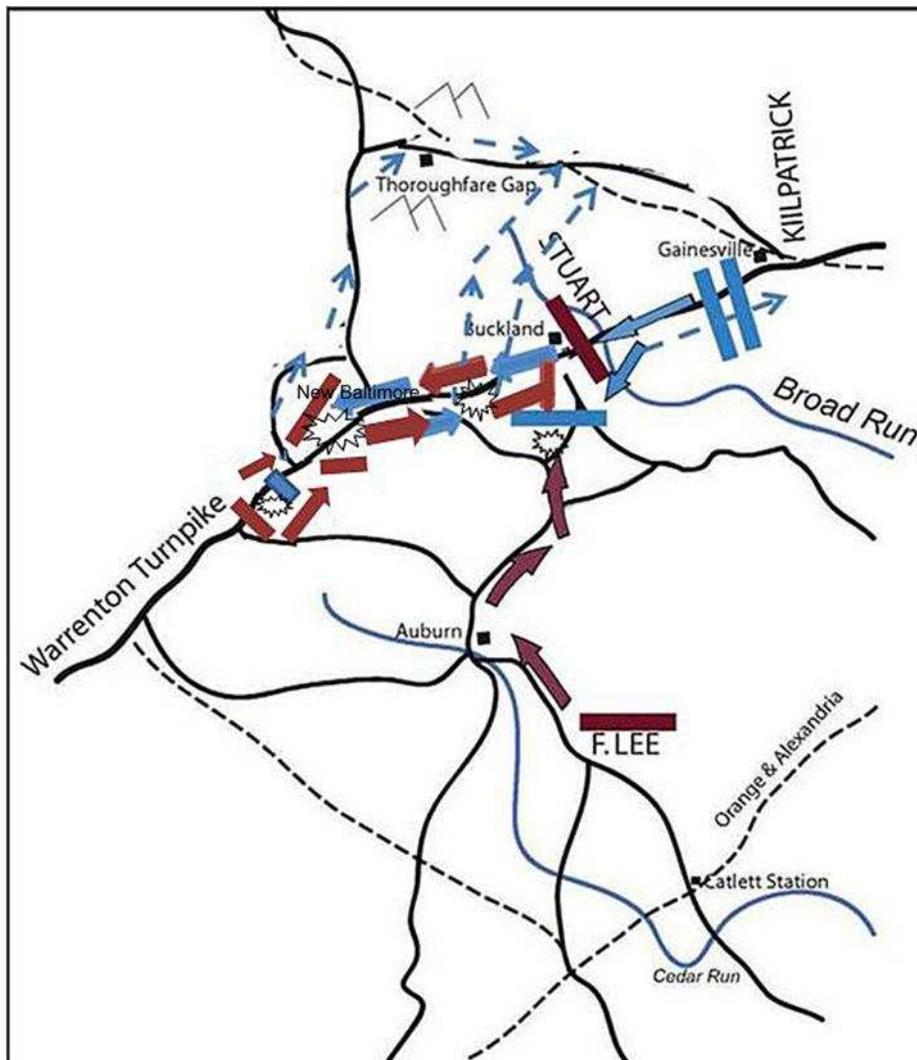
remaining US cavalry over Broad Run and north in full retreat.

The battle is often referred to as the "Buckland Races" for, "Hootin' and hollerin' all the way, Stuart's Rebel horsemen chased the fleeing Yankees back to Buckland in an action that resembled a spirited steeplechase rather than a military operation." In addition to 250 US casualties, half the Federal ambulances, wagons, and ammunitions were seized, Custer's personal papers were confiscated, and 200 prisoners were marched to the Warrenton jail. Wrote Stuart: "I am justified in declaring the route of the enemy at Buckland the most single and complete that any cavalry has suffered during the war." The next day, Stuart crossed to the south side of the Rappahannock River, to join the rest of General R. E. Lee's force. ∎
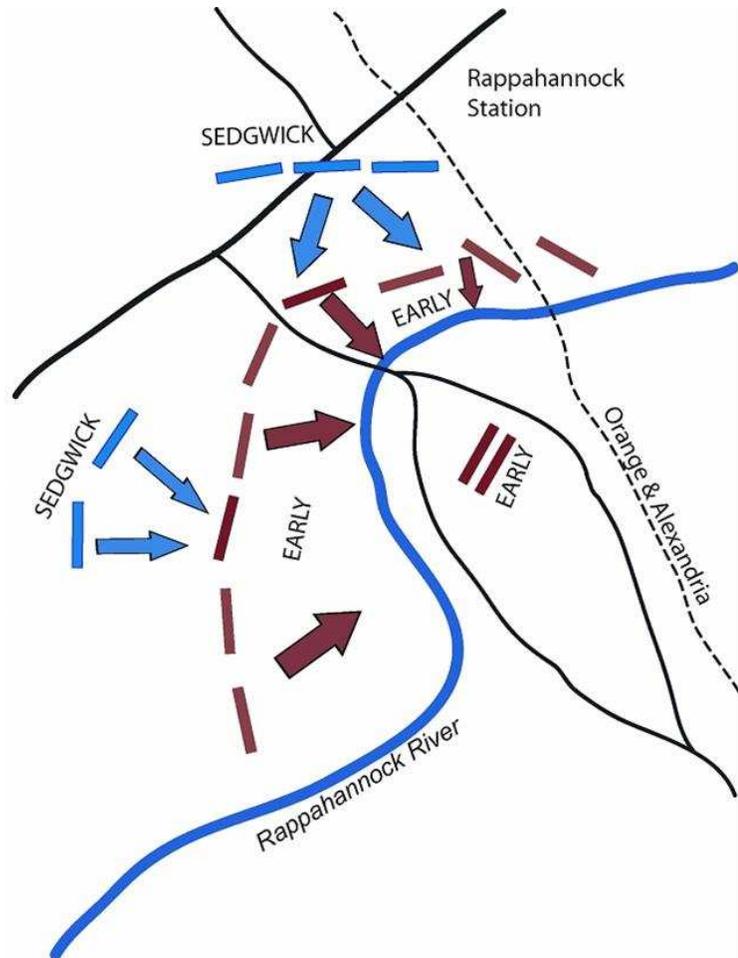
The Second Battle of Rappahannock Station
November 7, 1863

Result:
Union Victory

Troops Engaged:
~2,000 US
~2,000 CS

Casualties:
~419 US
~1,674 CS

On November 7, Meade ordered an assault against Lee's Confederate infantry along the Rappahannock River. Dividing his forces, Meade ordered General John Sedgwick to attack Rappahannock Station while General William H. French moved five miles downstream to Kelly's Ford. In response, Lee shifted some of his force to Kelly's Ford, hoping to defeat French soundly, and left only a small number of men under General Jubal Early at Rappahannock Station.

Sedgwick's sharpshooters drove in the Rebel skirmishers and seized a range of high ground near the river. Sedgwick's guns and Confederate batteries maintained an active fire until dark. According to Lee's report: "It was not known whether this demonstration was intended as a serious attack or only to cover the movement of the force that had crossed at Kelly's Ford, but the lateness of the hour induced the belief that nothing would be attempted until morning." He was mistaken. Sedgwick's infantry rushed the works and engaged Early's men in hand to hand combat. No information of the attack was received on the south side of the river until too late for the artillery stationed there to aid in repelling it, and fear of injury to their own captured men further prevented that action. Many Confederates tried to escape across the river, but Federal fire and freezing water stopped most. In total, more than 1,670 Confederates were killed, wounded, or captured in this engagement. This disastrous Confederate defeat forced Lee to retreat further south for the winter than originally planned. ∎

Burning the Rappahannock railroad bridge at Rappahannock Station, Oct. 13, 1863. Sketch by Alfred R. Waud. Library of Congress collection.

The Battlefields Today

Auburn

The community of Auburn is a largely rural and agricultural area, much as it was in the nineteenth century. Modern roads follow the paths of their Civil War predecessors, making landmarks such as Coffee Hill—tucked into the curve of Highway 602 (Old Carolina Road) on the north bank of Cedar Run—easy to find. The wooded ravine, which provided cover for Stuart's men the night of October 13-14, also remains. ■

Buckland Mills

As you drive along Lee Highway (old Warrenton Turnpike) in Buckland, you're following the progression of the Battle of Buckland Mills. From Broad Run to New Baltimore, most of the day's action occurred along this road. ■
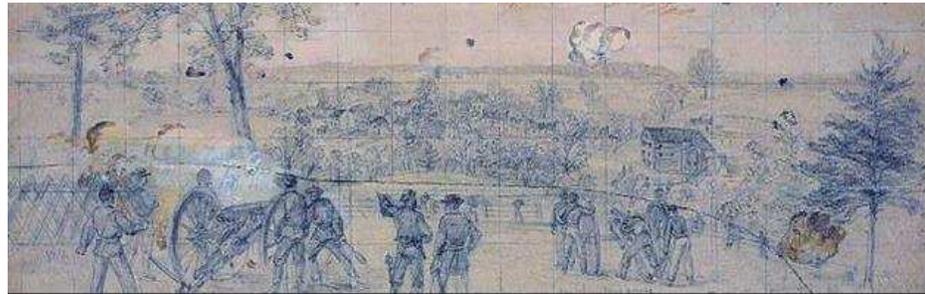
"Buckland from Mr. Hunton's House, scene of cavalry engagement with Stuart." Sketch by Alfred R. Waud, Oct. 19, 1863. Library of Congress Collection.

Rappahannock Station

Rappahannock Station (today's Remington) was the site of two separate battles, both involving the railroad and the Rappahannock River. The second of these engagements involved a rare night-time attack and brutal hand-to-hand combat. A pontoon bridge (which replaced the burned railroad bridge) was defended by a tete-de-pont constructed on the north bank by Lee's engineers. Portions of the pontoon bridge were recovered by the Union forces. The pontoon bridge was located in the river bend just upstream from the Bus. Rt. 15/29 Highway bridge. ■

Rappahannock Station, Virginia. Federal encampment near railroad. Photo by Timothy O'Sullivan August 1862. Library of Congress Collection.

Become Involved in Your History!

Want to learn more about the Civil War or help save a battlefield? The following organizations in your area are committed to history and preservation:

Fauquier Historical Society
http://www.fauquierhistory.com/

Fauquier County Department of Community Development
http://www.fauquiercounty.gov/government/departments/commdev/

Citizens for Fauquier County
http://www.citizensforfauquier.org/

Central Virginia Battlefields Trust
http://www.cvbt.org/

Civil War Preservation Trust
http://www.civilwar.org/

American Battlefield Protection Program
http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/abpp/
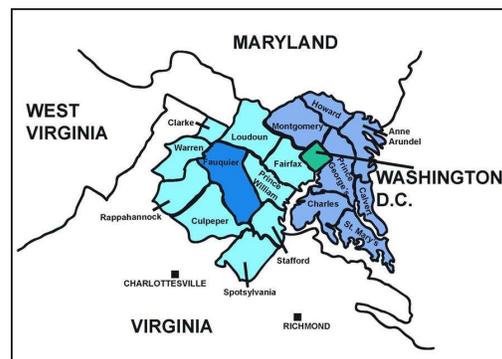
Fauquier County, Virginia

Located just 55 miles from Washington, D.C., and 95 miles from Richmond, Fauquier County's historic resources are just a short drive away and easily accessible.